



The wonky wonder of New York's Ear Inn: 'It's filled with memorabilia that had nowhere else to go'

Adrian Dannatt / Photographed for the FT by Max Burkhalter
August 12, 2025

The home of sailor-musician Rip Hayman and his wife Barbara Pollitt has been a bar since 1817, its storied rooms hosting characters from world-weary sea dogs to Hungarian surrealists

The Ear Inn has the distinction of being the longest continuously serving bar in all New York; ale has been supped and noggins quaffed since 1817. Next to the Hudson on the very edge of SoHo, it occupies the ground floor of one of the oldest surviving buildings in Manhattan, a precariously ramshackle structure that has looked like it is about to fall down ever since being built in 1800.

The listed Federal-style James Brown House is named after the African-American aide to George Washington during the revolutionary war, for whom it was built. The ground floor has sincemorphed from sailors' drinking den to prohibition speakeasy and back again, while upstairs was in turn boarding house, brothel, doctor's office — and home to one of the most curious and curiously overlooked 20th-century artists, Sari Dienes.

"I was introduced to Sari by John Cage as a young music student at Columbia, and back in 1973 she moved in as my roommate," says Rip Hayman, current owner of the building. "She was already in her seventies and slept in the captain's bedroom. Four of us split the \$100 a month rent." Dienes continued to live upstairs until her death in 1992 at the age of 93, leaving her art and nothing else.



The front meeting room of James Brown House, named after the African-American aide to George Washington during revolutionary war

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Artist Sari Dienes bought the building in 1977 for \$5,000



She lived above the bar until her death in 1992, at the age of 93

Hayman, 74, and his wife Barbara Pollitt, 69, paid for her funeral, and now serve, respectively, as director and curator of the Sari Dienes Foundation. Living above the Ear Inn, they also continue to call it home. “It feels like a country village home set at many angles, making visitors climb precariously as if in a rolling sea,” says Hayman. “Fortunately the house has solid neighbours to lean on . . .”

The wobbly warren is built around an all-wood frame and spread over two-and-a-half floors. Posters for concerts and performances once

hosted here happily yellow along the walls and an array of antique Americana makes a picturesque ramble along the period mantelpiece. The whole place is filled with a higgledy-piggledy assortment of art and objects: long boat oars, a diver’s helmet, odd top hats and proud junk — evidence of the lives of its occupants. While Hayman is a longtime professional sailor as well as a musician, Pollit was a puppeteer for the legendary avant-garde company Mabou Mines. Their son Adrian is a sound engineer. Amid the maze of muddle, Dienes’s creative legacy is still vibrantly present; whether an eerie small surrealist painting with eye, nose and tongue or a mandala collage of archeological remains gathered from the basement. The kitchen still houses the round table where she staged weekly poker games, maximum bet \$1. “She would sit on the down side of the table slanted by the crooked floor and eventually most chips would slide her way,” says Hayman. “‘Early lose, late win,’ she would say as her friends staggered down the steep stairs out into the night.”

Dienes was born in Austria-Hungary in 1898, moved to Vienna, Paris, Wales and then London, where she helped the French painter and writer Amédée Ozenfant establish his art school and invited Henry Moore to teach sculpture. But in 1939 she moved to New York and became embedded in a nexus of emerging talent that included Mark Rothko and Isamu Noguchi as well as composers Morton Feldman and David Tudor. While creating a vastly varied and technically complex oeuvre, spanning everything from biomorphic ceramics and textiles to pure abstraction, Dienes became a mentor to a young generation of artists such as Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. She called them “my boys” and from 1953 onwards gave them impromptu lessons in collage and bricolage in her own studio. She also boldly led them out into the Downtown streets to help with her groundbreaking, certainly ground-covering, “Sidewalk Rubbings”, created in the 1950s.

Around that time, “Sari discovered this falling-down, dead-end bar”, says Hayman. “It was so rough back then — it was the one place open at dawn, where the longshoremen could play pool and use the phone booth. Sari was the only woman allowed, this eccentric figure who everyone respected in the neighbourhood, which was the worst in the city.”

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Hayman can well recall the brutal blight of the area, even by the standards of a then bankrupt New York. “There was no toilet, no heat, no water,” he says. “We eventually turned it into a community space for concerts, performances and happenings. Then Sari bought the bar in 1977 for \$5,000; the owners were Hungarian like her and the whole deal was done in their native language. We all celebrated with a big Thanksgiving dinner.”

Dienes had no money and bought the building by selling an artwork that Rauschenberg had given to her — one of his pioneering minimalist

“White Paintings” created in the early 1950s. “Bob was furious and would ring up every night yelling,” says Hayman. “He wanted to go to court until his lawyers suggested it might look bad for one of the wealthiest artists in the world to be suing his penniless old lady teacher!” Today’s happy denizens of the inn, as busy and beloved as ever, should raise a thankful toast to the magical, transformative potential of art, even an entirely blank white canvas.

“Sari was soon the queen of her little bar and put us to work,” says Hayman. “I started cooking in the kitchen and at the beginning the menu was \$5 for all you can eat.” Hayman’s chilli remains a favourite, alongside their classic cheeseburger, chicken pot pie and rightly celebrated tacos.

“We spend so much time keeping Sari in the public eye, organising exhibitions, lending work,” says Pollitt, highlighting her recent representation by Eric Firestone Gallery, who will be showing her work at Frieze in London in October. “But we also have to make sure this place stays alive. The Ear Inn is Sari’s living legacy of her sociability, though most visitors have never heard of her.”

Three tiny bedrooms with dramatically sloping roofs and tipsy floorboards still host sporadic guests. The wonky wonder of it all conjures the last of the classic “crash pads”. “Most of the knick-knacks, and the exotic musical instruments — such as a Chinese lute guqin, Balinese gamelan ensemble, African drums, Indian veena and snake charmer oboe — have been left by friends of the house as memorabilia that had nowhere else to go,” says Hayman.

The sailor-musician — who plays flute, piano, organ, bells and percussion — graduated from the US Merchant Marine Academy in 2005 as a maritime security officer and Nato sealift reserve, and has circumnavigated the globe countless times. He was once reported sunk during a South China Sea typhoon. He has also run ice-class



The kitchen still houses a round table where Dienes staged weekly poker games



The home still sporadically hosts guests in its three tiny bedrooms

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The walls of the inn, lined with pictures, including images of John Lennon, who would visit to play cards

they launched for new music. The vintage phone booth once in the bar is now a voice booth for recordings in the Earadio studio — for podcasts and audio books.

Among all the festive bric-a-brac are images of Hayman's close friend John Lennon, who would come over to play cards. In turn, Hayman worked at Lennon's apartment in the Dakota, building a "play room" and custom studio. "One night I had a very strange visit from these two mean guys who told me they'd heard I was in trouble, something was about to happen and I better leave town," he recalls. "I grabbed a bag and left. The next week John was assassinated. I would have been a witness to his death. I fled to China and spent the next 20 years there as a music teacher, publisher and ship designer for a fleet of liners on the Yangtze."

Lennon is one of "so many family ghosts here to always keep us company", chuckles Hayman. It's an intriguing cast of characters that have haunted the home, from Hungarian surrealist to world-weary sea dog, as well as notable figures from Salvador Dalí to Tom Waits.

"We just about manage to keep the place patched up and running," sighs Hayman, as he gathers his bags to set sail yet again — on a Silversea ship to the Baltic and Norway. "We must always remember that without Sari we wouldn't be here, this would just be another damn parking lot or one more fashion boutique."

ships through the Antarctic and Arctic and devised a "Hudson Valley Line" passenger service. For The Ear Inn is forever linked — historically, socially and geographically — to that local river. Indeed, a marker outside shows how its shore used to come to the very edge of the building, literally a step from the front door.

Its neon sign is a historic landmark; originally saying "BAR", the B was partly painted out to make it "EAR" when the place was renamed in 1975 to avoid Landmark regulation which prohibited new signs on listed buildings. The DIY alteration was perfectly suited to their impromptu sonic events and the Ear Magazine

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